

# **Bergen Abstracts for The Bergen-Cambridge Postgraduate Symposium**

## **Modern Åsatru in Norway: Reception, Esotericism**

Rein Tveit, University of Bergen

There are a number of groups in society today that practice what is usually called ‘åsatru’ (belief in the *æsir*). All of these groups supposedly construct their ideology based on Old Norse mythology and/or culture. Nevertheless, certain groups advocate ideologies that are radically opposed to each other. Some groups advocate modern humanist values like antiracism, tolerance and pacifism, while other groups are clearly extremely right-wing, openly racist, nationalist, and with a war-like mindset.

The esoteric reception of Old Norse sources has a long tradition, one that is even connected to the field of the study of Old Norse philology, especially with regard to the academics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Also intertwined in all of this is the rather ambiguously named ‘New-Age’ movement (Wicca, etc.). Lately there seems to be an increasing interest in the formal study of all things Old Norse among self-declared *åsatru* or ‘pagans’, and this has an impact on the way Åsatru is carried out in practice.

The purpose of this study is to examine both the roots of modern Åsatru in Norway, as well as the shapes it takes in Norwegian society today. I will also be asking how radically opposed ideologies can draw their inspiration from the same sources, or whether that is actually what they do.

## **Reading Sagas from Artwork: Can we ‘Read’ Sagas from Gotlandic Picture-Stones?**

Jonas Koesling, University of Bergen

Literature from mediaeval Iceland is not only about contemporary times. There are also texts about mythological times and heroic events occurring in a world so alien that we feel forced to accept that the Viking Age world, its worldview(s) and belief(s), are as different from ours as from the early Christian writers who recorded it. This, of course, can only be true if that later literature recorded by the early Christians has much older roots in the Viking Age and is not pure fiction.

Some of the stories, or tales – to use a most neutral term – known through Old Norse literature, are actually thought to be old, perhaps reaching back to the Migration Period. This is, among other sources, the case for the Gotlandic picture-stones, which form the material basis for my discussion. On such picture-stones, several sagas were ‘discovered’, the Völsung-cycle dominating current debates on such stones. The point of my paper will be, however, to question whether we really can talk of ‘reading’ a saga from an artwork or not. Can we read Viking Age picture-stones at all?

My work on this question tracks the problematic relationship of both the studies of Old Norse literature and other disciplines concerned with material culture to the pictorial sources, but also the disciplines’ relationship with each other. There seems to exist no clear common methodology. By that, I mean a gap between the fields of study, rather than a total lack of methods. The possibility of ‘reading’ artefacts as texts appears methodologically as a commonplace that needs no further explanation.

Working with the premise that the reading of an artwork should not just include its iconographic deciphering, but should also comprise the situation of that object in a wider

historical and performative context, I approach a functional analysis of the chosen artefacts as collective, communicative media.

### **The Case System of the *Hildina Ballad***

Bjarni Steintún, University of Bergen

The *Hildina ballad* as noted down by the Scottish clergyman George Low in 1774 is one of the few sources of the now extinct Norn language of Shetland and Orkney. The aim of this paper is to chart the state of the Norn language — primarily the grammatical case system — at the time of its demise, around the 18th century. The *Hildina ballad* will form the source material, since it is, as far as we know, the only existing text in Norn of any considerable length. Therefore it remains central in any attempt to characterise the former language of the Northern Isles. The most thorough work on the ballad was done by Marius Hægstad in 1900 in his “Hildinakvadet med utgreiding om det norske maal paa Shetland i eldre tid”. Hægstad elaborates on the very inconsistent orthography and erroneous word separation (e.g. splitting grammatical endings from the stem) and the disorder of many of the stanzas in Low’s original manuscript. These issues render it difficult to make sense of the words and to come to conclusions on the grammar of the language. Nonetheless it is the best source we have, and not wholly unfruitful to work with.

The order of the paper is as follows: Firstly, a short outline of the Norn language is given. Then I will present the source material and begin the analysis, which will be aimed mainly at the case system. In conclusion, I will discuss whether the *Hildina Ballad* is representative of a contemporary Norn language or if the poetic nature of the text retains archaic words and/or grammatical forms no longer in use, thus presenting to us an older stage of the language.

### ***Brynhildar táttur* and its Medieval Analogues**

Mortan Nolsøe Leslie-Jacobsen, University of Bergen

In my paper I will present a project description of my MA-thesis. In my thesis I will compare the Faroese ballad *Brynhildar táttur*, specifically variant Ab, to its medieval analogues, especially *Vǫlsunga saga*. The aim of my thesis is to find out what traditions (i.e. Icelandic, German) influenced the Faroese materials the most, and to see how the Faroese material differs.

*Brynhildar táttur* (BT) and *Vǫlsunga saga* both treat the character of Brynhildr in depth. Nevertheless, the details of the story differ quite considerably in places. T. Andersson in *The Legend of Brynhild* has argued briefly that BT was directly influenced by *Vǫlsunga saga*, but this particular set of ballad material warrants research to see whether that actually seems to be the case on closer investigation.

In broad outline, my project will focus on the interrelation between the older Faroese ballad material and its medieval Nordic and Middle High German analogues. In the case of BT, I would like to pose the following questions: what influenced the Faroese material the most? How is the Faroese material different to its European analogues? On this basis, what can be said about literary contacts in the later medieval period?

My starting point for the investigation will be a comparison of the *táttur* with the Old Norse-Icelandic material, since I am most familiar with it. As a first step I will determine where the *táttur* and the eddic poems, *Vǫlsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga* agree and disagree. Then I will analyse the *Nibelungenlied*. I will need to determine whether or not the

Scandinavian ballads are relevant to my investigation, i.e. if they are directly connected to BT.

### **Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend (?): Science, Learning and Gender in the Old Icelandic *riddarasögur***

Florian Schreck, University of Bergen

How could women in Old Norse literature influence or strive to control male dominated spheres? For the genre of the *Íslendingasögur*, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir makes a strong case for magic as a means to gain power and influence independent from male agency. She argues for magic as a narrative device to give women a tool or “weapon” in those instances where traditional male strategies were inaccessible to them.

My paper investigates this issue for the Old Icelandic romances or *riddarasögur*, a genre in which female characters are often in leading political positions, such as kingship, a rank generally only attainable by men in the Middle Ages. While these female figures do indeed enjoy a wider range of strategies, frequently including traditional male ones such as warfare, they were mostly still dependent on a male intermediary. If they desire to pursue their own agendas directly, they recurrently rely on *náttúrusteinar*. Scholars commonly refer to these wondrous stones as “magic stones”, because while some of them heal specific illnesses, others grant the ability to fly, become invisible or bestow other likewise incredible abilities. The *náttúrusteinar* in the Old Icelandic *riddarasögur* thereby possess features that from our modern day perspective might appear supernatural. My paper, however, will demonstrate that they were in fact not actually thought of as magical, at least not in Old Norse literature. To that end, I will examine the close intertextual relationship between the fictional romances and their factual sources, i.e. the scientific treatises on stones.

My paper thus argues for science and learning, instead of magic, as weapons for (noble) women in the Old Icelandic *riddarasögur*, and the medium of romance as a means of communicating ideas and reflections on science via fictional literature.

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir. “Women's Weapons. A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*.” *Scandinavian Studies* 81 (2009): 409-436.

### **Generalized Referential Orthography in Action**

Robert K. Paulsen, University of Bergen

Any phonological analysis of Old Norse manuscript material relies on the comparison of said material to an orthographic standard. The most obvious choice for such a standard is normalized Old Norse as it is used in grammars and dictionaries. Some manuscripts however reflect linguistic phenomena not represented in the standard normalization, be it orthographic features like morphological spellings or phonological features such as differences between long /á/ and /ǫ/ or between short /e/ and /æ/. In such cases analysts will – often implicitly – choose to modify the normalization to account for the divergent phonology.

The exact nature of this phonological divergence, however, is not necessarily assessable in advance, and only the orthographic analysis at hand might shed light on the phonology of the writer's language. This opens the door to circular argumentations. My PhD-project is concerned with the development of a generalized referential orthography for Old Norse that can be used as the basis for any orthographic – and thus phonological – analysis of Old Norse written sources. This referential orthography is based in etymology and

morphological structure, which makes the implicit modifications to the standard normalization explicit and thus leads to what might be called a “super”-normalization. This generalized referential orthography enables the analyst to discuss manuscript orthography without making premature assumptions about the scribe’s phonology. The usefulness and practical implementation of this I will demonstrate by presenting my recent research on Old Norwegian vowel harmony.

### **Wondrous Strangers: The Diffusion of a Courtly Motif through the Sagas**

Will Biel, University of Oslo/University of Iceland

The late thirteenth century *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* contains a scene in which a revenant appears before the court of Óláfr Tryggvason to give insult and offer a challenging quest. The episode bears striking resemblance to the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, yet direct influence between the texts is nearly unthinkable. This motif, of a wondrous stranger irrupting into a royal court, occurs in at least six other instances in Old Norse, all except *Bárðar saga* from the recognized corpus of the traditionally maligned *fornaldarsögur*. Yet previous scholarship on the matter appears unaware of these additional instances and posits common Irish origins for *Bárðar saga* and *Sir Gawain*. My thesis rejects the Irish hypothesis and rather understands the motif as an adaptation from Old French courtly romances. I structurally compare the motif in *Bárðar saga* with parallels from inside and outside the Old Norse corpus to establish its most likely path of transmission to the North and subsequent modification there. Though this was surely a dynamic diachronic process, the complicated manuscript preservation of the works concerned renders any but the most rudimentary timelines problematic at best. I therefore divide my analysis by languages and engage more synchronically with the motif in each linguistic context. Though, in conclusion, I concede the motif’s ultimate derivation from Celtic sources cannot be ruled out, I propose reevaluating the motif’s diffusion within the context of medieval Francophilia is a more productive method of engagement; one which more thoroughly adds to our understanding of cultural exchange between Scandinavia and the rest of medieval Europe.

### **The Germanic God Odin: An Interdisciplinary Approach to a Complex Deity**

Tom Hellers, Research Group for Medieval Philology, University of Bergen

In November 2009, a Viking Age figurine (see picture below), showing a person sitting on a throne, was excavated in Lejre, Denmark. On the armrests are two birds. This startling find was interpreted by the finder as Odin with his ravens Huginn and Muninn on his throne Hliðskjalf (Christensen, 2009; 2010) and immediately gained wide media coverage. Soon the first doubts about identifying the figure as Odin were expressed, as the clothes would indicate a female and therefore the figure is more likely the goddess Freya or Frigg (<http://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/var-odin-en-kvinde>). This small figurine of less than 2 cm demonstrates clearly the significance of this Germanic god and the research problems related to him.

In Old Norse literature, the Germanic god Odin is depicted as a complex divinity that has many different social, religious and mythological functions: the Allfather, god of runes and poetry, god of magic and ecstasy, god of war and the dead, the forefather of royal dynasties and so forth. The age of these conceptions, their expansion and changes are much discussed.

Scholarly interest in the historical background of written sources has, in recent studies, led to a stimulating debate on Odin and his age (most recently Lassen 2011; Libermann 2011; cf. also Hultgård 2007, 776-782). Archaeological findings raise new questions and one can discuss to what extent the contents of much younger written sources can be transferred to the findings and thus what new conclusions about the social and religious conditions of earlier centuries can be made.

In my paper, I would like to present my PhD-project, which must be seen in the context of this research discussion. The project deals with the miscellaneous conceptions of Odin in synchronic and diachronic perspective. Firstly, I would like to examine to what extent it is possible to verify this complexity in the older sources (4<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century), using textual and iconographic evidence, theophoric place names and archaeological finds. Secondly, I would like to find out whether and how the complexity of Odin manifests itself in the older sources, which functions Odin had at what time, and how the conceptions of the god change over the centuries. Thirdly, I would like to examine in where the conceptions exhibited in the older sources stand in relation to the depiction and the complexity of Odin in younger sources (which are from Old Norse literature and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* from High Middle Ages).

In my talk, I will illustrate the difficulties in interpreting the source material and offer an approach which can lead to a more reliable picture of Odin in heathen times. I will present my research method, the questions I would like to investigate and the results I hope to get out of my research.

Christensen, T. 2009: Odin fra Lejre, in: Årskrift fra Roskilde Museum, p. 6-25.

– 2010: Odin fra Lejre, in: Danefæ - Skatte fra den danske muld. Ed.by P. O. Nielsen/M. Andersen. Kopenhagen, p. 183-186.

Hultgård, A. 2007: Wotan-Odin, in: Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 35, p. 759-785.

Lassen, A. 2011: Odin på kristent pergament. En teksthistorisk studie. København.

Liberman, A. 2011: A short history of the god Óðinn, in: *Nowele* 62/63, p. 351-430.

<http://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/var-odin-en-kvinde>

